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Lecture 7 - 'THE GRAND ORIGINALS' E.Comp Revd Dr John R H Railton, PGStBr, Deputy Grand Superintendent (Wiltshire)

First of all, thank you for the invitation to deliver this lecture. In case you might be expecting a thoroughly researched and scholarly dissertation, may I preface my address by saying that it's based on my thoughts and reflections on some of the issues raised in our Ritual which have intrigued me since my own Exaltation as a Royal Arch Mason. In a number of talks delivered at various Masonic occasions, I have suggested that Freemasonry in general and the Royal Arch in particular might be regarded less as an Institution, but rather as an Expedition – that, as Brethren and Companions, we travel together on a journey into deeper knowledge and understanding, a journey which involves movement and change within ourselves, and a journey which continues into the future. So I'm offering something of my own experience from my journey in Freemasonry and, especially, in the Royal Arch. I have to say that, although these issues have fascinated me for a number of years, I'm still left with many questions unanswered. So I invite you to take what I have to say very much as 'work in progress'. My wife has a card hanging on our study wall which says: 'Be patient with me, God hasn't finished with me yet.' We might all say the same, and it's in that spirit that I offer my thoughts.

A word first about dates. We all know what we mean by BC and AD. In these days of political correctness, I believe we're now supposed to replace AD with CE for Common Era. Well, political correctness has never been one of my vices and God grant that it never will be, but if you wish to do so, please interpret my references to BC as signifying Before the Common Era.

When I joined this Order I wasn't Ordained, nor yet accepted for Ordination training, but my faith in God was strong and searching. My familiarity with Old Testament scriptures, I fear, was somewhat sparse, but even so I recognised the first passage from scripture quoted in the Exaltation ceremony, that from the Writings of King Solomon – Proverbs Chapters 3 & 4, extolling the virtues of 'Wisdom' and representing Wisdom as a personality to be befriended, even courted, and embraced. This passage relates to a period approximately AL 3000, or 1000 years BC. Rather to my surprise, I also recognised the second passage, this time from the Book of the Prophet Haggai 2:1-9 with its references to Zerrubabel, Joshua and Haggai, dating from around 500 BC, which provides part of the scriptural basis for this degree. When, as the candidate, I was readmitted for the second part of the ceremony, I listened with fascination to the dialogue between the MEZ and the Principal Sojourner, with its references to 'Three Master Masons from Babylon' returning after the Fall of the Babylonian Empire and the ending of the 70-year Exile, and recognised the reference to the Edict of Cyrus King of Persia in 538 BC which heralded the ending of the Exile. So far, so good.

Now, in the Chapter in which I was exalted, it was the practice then for the Lectures of all three Chairs to be given at every Exaltation. Bemusing for any candidate to have so rich and, perhaps, indigestible a banquet offered at one sitting, but the part which seized and held my attention and has stayed with me was in the first sentences of the Historical Lecture. You will recall the phrase that "The First or Holy Lodge was opened AL 2515 two years after the Exodus of the children of Israel from their Egyptian bondage, by Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel, on consecrated ground at the foot of Mount Horeb in the wilderness of Sinai". In the dialogue between the MEZ and PSoj at dinner, Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel are referred to as the 'Three Grand Masters who presided over the Holy Lodge'. My curiosity was aroused – could Moses himself really have been a member of an organisation, a fraternity with aims even remotely echoing those of either operative or speculative Freemasonry? Or could this refer to another Moses – after all, it was a common enough name? Yet the reference to the Holy Lodge being opened two years after the Exodus implies, surely, that this was the same person. And the designation of the 'Holy Lodge' derives, so the Historical Lecture tells us, from earlier events at Mount Horeb. It refers to Moses' encounter with God in the Burning Bush, found in Exodus Chapter 3; and to the Giving of the Ten Commandments (Chapter 20) and the comprehensive laws which follow in the next ten Chapters of Exodus. So who else could this be but the Moses who led the Chosen People on their journey into freedom in the Promised Land?

What of the other two characters, Aholiab and Bezaleel? Sure enough, there they are, introduced to the reader in Exodus 11:2,6 – "See, I have called by name Bezaleel of the tribe

of Judah and behold, I have given with him Aholiab of the tribe of Dan". But why these two? Why not Aaron who, after all, seems from the Biblical accounts to have been much closer than either Bezaleel or Aholiab to the role of a deputy to Moses. Part of the answer may perhaps be in verses 3 & 4 concerning Bezaleel – "And I have filled him with the spirit of God in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship." An earlier incarnation of Hiram Abiff? It did cross my mind that yet another Masonic Order may exist, as yet unknown to me, in which Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel are the principal officers! But why introduce Moses, the Exodus, the Red Sea or Mount Horeb into Masonic legend at all – unless it was to be seen as an allegory of journey, of Expedition, as I hinted earlier; and of the varied experiences which form and shape us. And yet all those components have been woven into our ritual.

And why at that time was there said to be 'consecrated ground' at the foot of Mount Horeb? Later centuries brought the establishment of a religious community there, but at the time of the Exodus it was barren and empty desert.

I found another problem too. While our ritual gave us a very precise date, AL 2515 or 1485 BC, for the opening of the Holy Lodge and tells us that it was two years after the Exodus, every Biblical authority seems to agree that the date of the Exodus was actually around 1290 BC, some two hundred years later. That was one of the questions which remained with me.

The Historical Lecture then moves our thoughts on by some 500 years to the reign of Solomon, and the opening of the Second or Sacred Lodge in AL 2992 or 1008 BC. It reminds us of David, the youngest son of Jesse who, as a young boy during the reign of Saul, King of Israel, was anointed by Samuel for future greatness. The story is in 1 Samuel 16, and the following chapters tell the tale of David and Jonathan which is the basis of another Masonic degree to which I don't belong, the Order of the Secret Monitor or the Brotherhood of David and Jonathan. The two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were united under David but, as his reign wore on, he seems to have lost his way politically and appealed to God for help.

Through the prophet Gad, David received the command of God to "rear an altar unto the Lord in the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite", and David obeyed that command and made sacrifice on that spot, so we are told in the closing verses of the 2nd Book of Samuel. This was the same site on Mount Moriah as that on which Abraham had been willing, in utter obedience to God, to sacrifice his son Isaac. David, weak with sickness and near to death, almost lost his throne through the plotting of the ambitious pretender Adonijah, but the 1st Book of Kings tells how David averted that threat and set his own son, Solomon on the throne instead. Solomon the Wise, because he sought wisdom, not power or riches. 1 Kings 3:5: "And God said, Ask what I shall give thee". And Solomon replied: "I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in. Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and evil". It was the exercise of that God-given wisdom which enabled Solomon to lead his people into an age of justice, stability and peace; and to Solomon's thanksgiving project in fulfilment of the dream of his father David to raise such a Temple as had never been seen, on that same site on Mount Moriah. There are now two Mosques on Mount Moriah - the Mosque with the Golden Dome, and the Al Aqsa Mosque, and it's far from certain which of them stands on the site of King Solomon's Temple – if, indeed, either of them do! The Temple was seven years in building, and Solomon's great prayer of Dedication (1 Kings 8:22-30) is familiar to any who have attended the Consecration of a Lodge or Chapter. Both Solomon and Hiram King of Tyre feature prominently in the scriptural accounts. And there also, in 1 Kings 7:13,14 is Hiram the Widow's Son – "And king Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass: and he was filled with wisdom, and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass."

Solomon reigned for some 39 years and, following his death in 922 BC, the lack of that God-given wisdom led over the next 300 years or so to the collapse of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah and to their becoming subject states under the control first of Assyria and then of Babylon, culminating in the Deportation in 587 BC and the Babylonian Exile.

Then we turn our attention to the Third, or Grand and Royal Lodge, opened "in Jerusalem" AL 3469, or 531 BC. It's interesting that the period of time between the opening of the Holy and the Sacred Lodges, and of the Sacred and the Grand or Royal Lodges is the same – 477 years. I have yet to work out whether there is any particular significance in the selection of that interval. The time is the collapse of the Babylonian Empire, the ending of the Exile, and

the Restoration of the Kingdom of Judah – a time of great hope and opportunity – akin, perhaps, to the Armistice which ended the two World Wars, the lifting of a shadow, the opening of new possibilities for the future.

The scriptural basis of this degree is in the Books of the Prophets Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah. Here we have all three of the principal characters working in harmony. First Zerrubabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and of Royal Blood; and Joshua the High Priest, the son of Josedech. Genealogy was important in identity and establishing credentials, so there's no special significance in these two being described as the SONS of prominent and, presumably, influential people. But perhaps also they represent a new age, a new generation, a new era? And, of course, the third character, Haggai the Prophet, the mediator, the channel of communication between God and those He had chosen to further his sacred work, and whose visions motivated and energised Zerrubabel and Joshua. Source material is more available and more reliable about events at this time, so we can have greater confidence in the existence of these three characters than in that of those who allegedly presided over the Holy or Sacred Lodges. In the selected quotation from the 2nd Chapter of Haggai, our Ritual presents a very positive image of the energetic project to rebuild the Temple. But it might be helpful to take a look at the first chapter. Chapter 1 verse 2: "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is NOT come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." The time is not come? Then there follows an invitation to reflect on priorities; to consider what's really important. Verse 4: "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house to lie waste? Now therefore thus sayeth the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways." It's a call to understand the centrality of God in life; to appraise and adjust priorities. The message for the people of Judah is the same as it is for us; all our efforts will accomplish nothing worthwhile unless it is done with humility and acknowledgement of our utter dependence on him, the True and Living God Most High. Chapter 2 verse 9: "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former, and in this place I will give peace." – obedience and submission will lead to greater stability and glory. There was strong opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple, and the project was suspended for some eighteen years, until there was a true sense of unity of purpose to fulfil a shared vision. As we contemplate the task we face in the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem, no less than that of rebuilding God's Temple in our own lives through our obedience to Him, so we also remember the parallel stories linked with the First or Holy Lodge, and the Second or Sacred Lodge. Remember that Moses brought down the Tablets of the Law from Mount Horeb, and smashed them on the Golden Calf, the creation of human disobedience; and God then renewed His Covenant with those people and renewed also the Law. Remember that it was the exercise of his God-given Wisdom which enabled Solomon to reign over a peaceful land; and that the ending of that wisdom also ended the peace and independence and took the people into captivity.

I've been reflecting on many of these issues on-and-off over the past twenty years or so, but it was only in preparing this address that I've made any serious attempt to be analytical or to try to find answers. The bottom line, of course, is that there are no answers – at least, not in the sense of resolving the apparent historical anomalies in our Ritual. And this, of course, has been recognised by Supreme Grand Chapter. The alleged dates of the openings of the Holy, Sacred, and Grand or Royal Lodges, which arose from a highly dubious seventeenth century chronology, have been removed from the Ritual. Not before time, if I may say so!

We're all very well aware that there are many apparent anomalies in Masonic Ritual, certainly to a student of scripture. It seems to me that, in coming to terms with them, there are two particular factors we should take into account. The first is that the oldest parts of scripture existed only in oral tradition until around 750 BC, and that even after written records began to develop, the style of writing, the materials used, the repeated copying and embellishment of the documents render them of very little value as a history, let alone a chronology. I find myself constantly suggesting to church congregations that they might regard Scripture as a 'window' – something to be looked through to discover the great truths about the nature and purpose of God which lie behind it, and not to be looked on as a literal or historical account or become obsessed with the detail. To some, of course, even the suggestion is tantamount to heresy! It's also the case that the movement towards general access to scriptural material didn't begin until the fourth century AD with a great work which resulted in what is still known as The Vulgate, the first Latin translation which also formed the basis for the earliest known passages of the texts in English in the seventh and eighth centuries; and, of course, that more general access was eventually facilitated by the invention of the printing press. And the second factor is to do with the way in which Masonic Ritual has developed. It was, after all, only in the fourteenth century AD that the oldest of Masonic documents appeared, containing

what are known as the Old Charges. While the earliest forms of the Ritual with which we are familiar probably were first set down in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries having existed in oral tradition for much longer, the more complex refinements and embellishments are relatively modern. Haywood's Commentary provides a neat summary: he says – "No Freemason is disturbed by these anomalies; he does not see them because they are not there; they are not there because the Rite is neither a history nor a theological or philosophical system but is a Ritual, and it belongs to Ritual to make use of any suitable materials which lie at hand, without regard to history, theology or philosophy; it is undisturbed by anachronisms, anomalies, and solecisms, and the fact that a Rite may say 'Such and such a thing happened' when everybody knows that no such thing ever occurred or could ever occur, has nothing to do with it".

We might be forgiven for concluding that those who conceived and codified Masonic Ritual would have been better advised not to seek to adopt characters, events and timescales from scripture, but instead to use wholly fictional material to convey essentially the same powerful teaching. That, at least, might possibly have avoided confusion. But any serious student of scripture knows well that many of the characters and events in scripture are themselves fictional – in that they have been composited from many different sources and timescales. Faith leaders down the ages have sought ways to express deep truths, and the traditional stories which now form the Sacred Writings of many faiths are part of that quest. But the real point behind the Rituals we love, Companions, is to convey something of the timelessness of the Divine Purpose; and of the art and the attitude to life which we practise today as Freemasons, but which has been practised by men of good-will and integrity since time immemorial.